

northwest

OBT's Banner Year

Kennedy Center debut caps breakout year for maverick ballet company

by Stephen Marc Beaudoin

"This is us!"

That's how Anne Mueller, in excited tones, describes the scene: 17 dancers, eight staffers and a phalanx of supporters from Portland's Oregon Ballet Theatre, all arriving in Washington, D.C., with sweaty palms and one heady ambition—to blow the roof off Kennedy Center in the company's debut performance there.

And by all critical and audience accounts, it happened.

OBT's June 12 performance, as part of Kennedy Center's first-ever "Ballet Across America" festival, caps a milestone year for a fast-rising Portland arts organization—the fifth largest in the tri-county region with a \$6.7 million annual budget—that only six years ago was hemorrhaging audiences and bleeding red ink on a steady diet of super-modern ballets by director James Canfield.

Since the 2003 arrival of San Francisco Ballet wunderkind Christopher Stowell as OBT's artistic director (see "Eyes on Him" in the May 2 edition of *Just Out*), the company has improved all out of recognition: Ticket revenue has risen 50 percent in five years, shows are reaching company-

record ticket sale highs, and most importantly, the breadth and depth of OBT's repertoire has been hugely expanded and the technical facility of the company dramatically improved.

"It's been completely exciting" seeing the transformation, says Mueller, a principal dancer who has been with OBT for 12 years. "Christopher's trajectory has just been through the roof."

The Kennedy Center performance might be the most fabulous feather in Stowell's cap for the company yet. After securing a landmark quarter-million-dollar one-time grant for the "Ballet Across America" appearance from the city of Portland through the office of Commissioner Sam Adams, a longtime arts champion, the company raised an additional \$50,000 to get to D.C.

Meg Kowalski, Kennedy Center's director of dance programming, called the festival "a tremendous think tank" for ballet professionals from across the country, featuring nine top U.S. classical ballet companies—including the likes of the Joffrey Ballet and Boston Ballet—sharing stages for three programs over five days. In addition, the troupes shared classes together, each taught by an artistic director from a different company.

"The energy that dancers summon from be-

ing around other dancers really brings things to another level," Mueller says, and she should know: For OBT's Kennedy Center performance, the company chose ballet dancemaker-of-the-moment Christopher Wheeldon's impossibly virtuosic "Rush" as its showpiece. Mueller acted as the ballet master for the work, drilling dancers on the steps and acting as a second set of eyes to Stowell.

"Every member of that cast has to be a really capable dancer," she says. "We had some 19-year-olds in there! For them to be in there and do it was a great accomplishment."

Another facet of that sense of awe the dancers encountered on the trip was the chance to work side by side with Wheeldon on stage in advance of their D.C. debut. Mueller says Wheeldon "responded well" to OBT's dancers, as they "spent quite a bit of time getting all of his notes and trying to apply them and really incorporate his information on the work."

For Stowell's company, the resulting buzz speaks for itself: *The Washington Post* called OBT's performance "a revelation...here is a group of tal-

ented and winsome dancers to watch."

Portland-area audiences may have already known this about OBT, but the national street cred of an acclaimed Kennedy Center appearance puts the company on a whole other plane. Now it knows it can play with the big kids in American ballet's crowded playground.

"The audience just responded so well, and everybody danced with great vitality and vibrance," Mueller recalls. "I felt like it was really...brave is not the right word, maybe courageous? This is a really bold way to say, 'This is who we are as a company, and this is how we dance.'" *jo*



Eyes on them: OBT storms Kennedy Center.

THYRA HARTSHORN

*Don't worry chief,
I will be all right.*

Valentino

**ROSE CITY
VETERINARY
HOSPITAL**

809 SE POWELL BLVD
232-3105

Sara Chinske
Loan Officer

Oregon Mortgage Group, Inc.

541-868-2660
sara@oregonmortgagegroup.com

1551 Oak Street, Suite B
Eugene, OR 97401

WESTOVER HEIGHTS
C L I N I C

Offering general internal
medicine and excelling
in sexual health care

Serving the community for 22 years

2330 NW Flanders
Suite 207
503-226-6678

WHITNEY S. KANG, DDS, PC
3336 SE Harrison St.
Milwaukie, OR 97222
503-794-9393

ZOOM! EXTREME!
for your brightest, whitest smile!
\$500⁰⁰ value for only **\$299⁰⁰**

We love giving our patients
more reasons to smile!

**It's
A
Dog's
Life**

DAY / PLAYCARE

**SLEEPOVERS WITH 24 HOUR CARE
OPEN 7 DAYS A WEEK**

- ACCOMMODATING ALL AGE DOGS
- 5000 SQ. FT. SUPERVISED INDR/OUTDR PLAY AREAS
- REINFORCED POSITIVE OBEDIENCE WHILE AT PLAYCARE

8709 N. LOMBARD ST. PORTLAND
503-286-2668

WWW.ITSADOGSLIFEDAY-PLAYCARE.COM

BBB MEMBER